Alternatives Current Pedagogy FOR Teaching the Present Perfect Progressive

IVEN THE DOMINANCE OF THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH IN LANGUAGE TEACHING, we assume that grammar explanations and grammar exercises will be well contextualized and discourse-based (Celce-Murcia and Olshtain 2000). There is also the expectation that such explanations and exercises will not be based primarily on the intuitions of the materials writers or of the teachers who prepare grammar lessons; they will be based on a solid understanding of when and how native speakers use a given structure. Such an understanding can only be arrived at by examining many authentic tokens of the target form occurring in natural contexts and by doing a discourse analysis of these tokens.

In order to gain a better understanding of when and how the present perfect progressive (PPP) tense-aspect combination is used in English, we collected 250 contextualized tokens of the PPP and subsequently carried out a qualitative discourse analysis of the results. In this article, we apply our findings to an evaluation of the presentation and teaching of this form in five widely used, recently published ESL/EFL grammar textbooks. We then propose some alternative ways of teaching the PPP based on our analysis.

Analysis of the present perfect progressive

The 250 tokens we analyzed were collected from spoken and written samples of adult native speakers of American English. The corpus includes data from oral corpora compiled from the following four sources:

- an oral corpus developed at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), which consists of narratives, academic lectures, radio show phone calls from listeners, formal conversations between professionals, informal conversations between friends, and classroom teacher-student interactions
- academic counseling sessions (from He 1993, 1998)
- Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (2000)
- The White House Transcripts (1974)

The written data include letters to the Dear Abby and Ann Landers advice columns; articles from *Newsweek*; and comic strips, cartoons, and articles appearing in *Los Angeles Times*.

There are five major findings of our data-based analysis of the PPP:

- 1. The PPP is a highly context-dependent form. Whether the activity described is completed just before, at, or after the moment of speech depends on the context. All of these possibilities occur in our data. Also, because the PPP is so context dependent, it occurs frequently with first and second person pronouns as subjects.
- 2. The PPP often occurs with a time adverbial but does not have to. When no overt adverbial occurs, there may be temporal framing in an earlier sentence in the discourse, or

- there may be a default time expressed, such as "recently" or "lately."
- 3. The PPP is typically part of a three-move structure with the first move providing background (in present or present perfect tense), the second and most crucial move highlighting an ongoing activity of concern (in PPP), and the third move giving some evaluation or follow-up (in present tense).¹
- 4. The PPP normally does not occur repeatedly over several adjacent clauses in a piece of discourse. It tends to occur once, preceded and followed by simpler tenses.²
- The discourse context, the semantics of the entire verb phrase, and any accompanying temporal adverbials are all part of the meaning conveyed by the PPP.

In the examples we cite in this article, the PPP forms are in bold face to assist the reader.

Review of five recent grammar texts

In light of our qualitative analysis of these 250 tokens of the PPP tense-aspect form, we examined five current ESL/EFL grammar texts that are in their second or third editions, which means these are successful and widely used textbooks. We looked specifically at the presentation and treatment of the PPP in the following texts:

- Azar, B. S. 1999. Understanding and using English grammar. 3rd ed.
- Elbaum, S. N. 2001. *Grammar in context*. 3rd ed.
- Maurer, J. 2000. Focus on grammar. 2nd ed.
- Murphy, R. with W. R. Smalzer. 2000. Grammar in use: Intermediate. 2nd ed.
- Riggenbach, H. and V. Samuda. 2000. Grammar dimensions 2. Platinum ed.

Problematic explanations of the PPP

None of these five texts makes it clear that the meaning of the PPP depends in part on the meaning of the verb phrase and/or time adverbials that this tense-aspect form combines with. In other words, the five texts did not explicitly state that the PPP normally signals an ongoing activity with duration but it can also signal iterative or repeated action if the meaning of the verb phrase is punctual (no overt adverbial of frequency is necessary):

Example 1

D: His partners **have been nipping** at him, but Herb is tough now.

(The White House Transcripts, p. 89)

In example 1, the meaning of 'nip' is iterative. By contrast, in the present perfect, with which the PPP is often compared, verbs are iterative only if there is some overt indication of repetition in an adverbial:

Example 2

His partners have nipped at him (five times), but Herb is tough now. (our modification of example 1)

Without an adverbial of frequency such as 'five times,' only a single nip is signaled when the present perfect is used in example 2. Thus, as we shall explain, a determination of whether the verb phrase expresses an activity, a state, a punctual action,³ or an accomplishment (Vendler 1967) is a critical element in the interpretation of the PPP or any other tense-aspect combination, for that matter.

All five texts suggest that there is little or no difference between the PPP and the present perfect with verbs like *live*, work, teach, study, etc. when 'for' or 'since' phrases are used as time adverbials.⁴ This is not always correct because in a job interview one might list relevant past experiences in the present perfect using these types of time adverbials. These experiences are not understood as being in effect at the moment of speech unless this is explicitly specified (i.e., with a time adverbial such as "[for] the past five years"). Also, we do not know whether or not there is any simultaneity or overlap in these past experiences:

Example 3

I've taught high school English for one year, ESL for four years, and word processing for two years. (constructed example)

If the speaker uses the PPP instead of the present perfect, then the implication is that all of these teaching activities are simultaneous and either in effect at the moment of speech or completed shortly before the moment of speech:

Example 4

I've been teaching high school English for one year, ESL for four years, and word processing for two years. (constructed example)

What happens in such examples if the verb is *live*, meaning 'reside'? In such a case, only the present perfect seems possible since people do not normally reside in different places at the same time:

Example 5a

I've lived in New York for two years, Chicago for five years, and Los Angeles for three years.

Example 5b

? **I've been living** in New York for two years, Chicago for five years, and Los Angeles for three years. (constructed examples)

Clearly, there are some differences that must be taken into account when the use of these two tense-aspect forms is compared using verbs like *live*, *work*, *teach*, etc. followed by 'for' and 'since' phrases.

Four of the five texts (Azar 1999, p. 15, 42; Elbaum 2001, p. 63⁵; Maurer 2000, p. 5⁶; Murphy with Smalzer 2000, p. 20c) state that stative or non-action verbs like *know, hear, mean, see*, and *want* cannot occur with the PPP. This is not accurate because tokens such as the following occurred in our database:

Example 6

"I've been hearing about an Internet collapse since 1977," he says. (*Newsweek*, 9/16/96, p. 96)

Finally, Riggenbach and Samuda (2000, p. 232) present a dialogue that encourages repetitive sequential use of the PPP by eliciting numerous tokens of PPP in adjacent clauses in a way that would not occur in authentic data, where normally only one clause, and no more than two successive clauses have the PPP. As pointed out in endnote 2, our data indicate that two successive clauses occur only under special circumstances.

Good explanations of the PPP

Three of the textbooks (Elbaum 2001, p. 45; Maurer 2000, p. 38; Murphy with Smalzer 2000, p. 22c) tell the learner not to use the PPP with adverbials like 'always' and/or 'never'. This may be a useful rule-of-thumb because we did not find any tokens of PPP co-occurring with 'always' or 'never' in our database. We think this is generally true because the PPP typically expresses very concrete actions and times whereas 'always' and 'never' are used to generalize actions over a

period of time. The forms thus seem semantically incompatible.

In some cases, one textbook gives an accurate and insightful explanation that is not offered in the other four. For example, Azar (1999, p. 42) is the only text of the five to state that when the PPP occurs without a time adverbial, it expresses a general activity in progress and that 'lately' or 'recently' are the adverbial meanings implied in such cases. This observation agrees with many tokens in our database. For example, tokens 7 through 9 strongly imply 'recently/lately' even though no overt adverbial occurs:

Example 7

We are pretty sure this will be our last Santa Claus Christmas because the boys **have** been asking a lot of questions and making comments about the existence of Santa. (letter to Ann Landers' advice column, *Los Angeles Times*, 11/25/96, section E, p. 6)

Example 8

HP: We **haven't been bringing** it over here for security reasons. (The White House Transcripts, p. 743)

Example 9

Wendy: **We've been taking** a lot of stuff to her. (*Santa Barbara Corpus*, file 13, 1578–1580)

The Riggenbach and Samuda textbook (2000, pp. 228–230) is the only one of the five that has exercises showing the learner that the activity occurring with the PPP may or may not be completed at the present time (at the moment of speech). This also agrees with our data, which show that the discourse context is what determines whether a verb phrase signals a completed action or an ongoing action at the moment of speech. Here is a token where the action has just been completed at the time of speech:

Example 10

He's been looking everywhere for that toy! (Context: He has just found it by tripping over it.) (Heathcliff cartoon, *Los Angeles Times*, 2/17/98, section E, p. 4)

Here is a token where the action clearly continues beyond the moment of speech:

Example 11

How many years **have you been teaching** here? (UCLA oral corpus, p. 326 line 17560)

The Murphy with Smalzer text (2000) shows that the contrast between the PPP and the present perfect is sometimes usefully viewed as one of activity versus result:

Example 12a

Ling's clothes are covered with paint. She has been painting the ceiling. (activity)

Example 12b

The ceiling was white. Now it is blue. She has painted the ceiling. (result) (examples from Murphy with Smalzer 2000, p. 20)

This observation agrees with our database for those tokens with verb phrases that express the accomplishment of something. Example 13 expresses an activity with PPP, but when the verb form changes to present perfect in example 14, the result of the action, or an accomplishment, is emphasized.

Example 13

D: I have been preparing the answers for the briefing book. (activity) (*The White* House Transcripts, p. 96)

Example 14

I have prepared the answers for the briefing book. (completed result) (constructed example based on example 13)

Maurer (2000, p. 33–34) presents use of the PPP in appropriate authentic texts but does not fully exploit the data to focus on and teach the use of the PPP. He includes an error correction activity (p. 43) and an information gap activity (pp. 44–46) but these activities provide very limited practice of the PPP because so many other verb forms are also practiced with no form receiving any special focus.

Riggenbach and Samuda (2000, p. 228) present the use of the PPP to talk about an activity that was happening very recently, the effect or results of which can still be observed or sensed:

Example 15

A: Why are your hands green?

B: I have been painting my room.

This also agrees with some tokens we have found in our database:

Example 16

K: How are you feeling?

P: Fine—a little tired—I've been working

very hard as you can imagine. (The White House Transcripts, p. 446)

The grammar texts did not adequately elaborate their exercises for use of the PPP to reflect the three-part structure we typically found in our database:

- Background
- Activity of focus/concern (with PPP)
- Evaluation

Azar (1999, p. 42–43), however, has one exercise that reflects this three-part structure. Unfortunately, the exercise focuses only on error analysis and correction, rather than productive use of the PPP:

Example 17

Instructions: Correct the errors in verb tense usage.

The boys are playing soccer right now.

They are playing for almost two hours.

They must be getting tired.

(Azar 1999, p. 42)

The learners are supposed to change "are playing" in the second sentence to "have been playing", but if they have not seen enough authentic examples of the three-part structure that appropriately use the PPP, they may not be able to do this successfully.

Related to our observations of a three-part structure, McCarthy (1998, p. 53–54), who also advocates the use of authentic discourse to teach grammar, points out that the interlocutor's follow-up (evaluation) is the part most often omitted in pedagogical treatments of many structures. In fact, Murphy with Smalzer (2000, pp. 18–25) present many well contextualized exercises; however, they consistently omit the evaluation move that occurs so frequently in our data. Below is an example of an exercise from Murphy with Smaltzer (2000, p. 19) that requires learners to complete the blank with the PPP:

Example 18

The rain started two hours ago. It's still raining now. (background)

It _____ for two hours.

Answer: It **has been raining** for two hours. (activity of focus with PPP)

We suggest adding a third step, an evaluative follow-up to exercises of this type, such as we provide in example 19, to more closely simulate tokens of the PPP found in natural discourse.

Example 19

The rain started two hours ago. It's still raining now. (background)

It's been raining for two hours. (activity of concern with PPP)

I wish it would stop. (evaluative follow-up)

In our data, the follow-up in the third step could come either from the speaker of the second step or from the interlocutor, as McCarthy (1998) suggests.

Summary of review

While all of the texts we reviewed had some strong points, they also had problems. We found that the Murphy with Smalzer text (2000) and the Riggenbach and Samuda text (2000) include a variety of exercises and activities; however, the instructor must judiciously use and carefully supplement them to reflect actual use of the PPP. Maurer (2000) is the most text-based of the books, but it doesn't zero in on target forms adequately. However, his texts could provide useful materials for teachers to adapt for purposes of teaching the PPP or other tense-aspect forms.

An alternative pedagogy: Teaching the PPP through discourse

In addition to adapting the exercises and explanations in the textbooks they already use grammar teachers can exploit authentic texts that contain tokens of the PPP, such as transcribed speech, letters to advice columnists, and comic strips. For example, we have used the following transcript of a segment from a radio talk show to present and practice the PPP with our students:

Example 20

Host: I'm Dr. Mary Smith⁸ and you're on talk radio. Hello?

Guest: Good afternoon, Dr. Smith. I'm Lucy and I'm 59. I'd just like to share a positive thing that I have found in the last year or so. **I've been hiking** and find that this is a wonderful way to keep your weight down and meet some people and just really feel good. (UCLA Oral Corpus, p. 94)

After our students have listened to the recording several times and asked questions about

any grammar or vocabulary they don't understand, we show them the transcript and point out that there is a typical pattern, with a predictable sequence of tense-aspect forms, in the segment:

First move: present context + past information (present or present perfect tense)

Second move: activity of focus, special concern of speaker (with PPP)

Third move: evaluation/follow-up (present tense)

The students identify the statements in the transcript for each move and then work in pairs or small groups to practice telling the class about something they have been doing. The first thing they should do is identify an activity they have been engaging in. Our students have suggested statements such as: 'I've been jogging three times a week,' 'I've been swimming almost every day,' 'I've been playing tennis with a friend,' and 'I've been riding my bicycle to school.' The discourse-level task is to develop a monologue like Lucy's; the students pretend they have called the radio talk show. Another possibility is to write a short conversation where the first move is the guestion 'What have you been doing lately?' Here is an example:

Example 21

Student 1: What have you been doing lately?

Student 2: **I've been jogging,** and it helps keep me in shape. (an answer that combines the second and third move)

Student 1: That's nice. (additional follow-up from the interlocutor)

Another situation where we found the PPP frequently used is complaints. Role plays lend themselves very well to practicing complaints. We use Hawkin's (1985) model situation with minor modifications to adapt it for use as a role play activity. One of the situations Hawkins used pedagogically, drawing on data reported in Schaefer (1982), is the following:

You take a morning off from work to go to the doctor because of a medical problem causing you pain. For two hours you sit in the waiting room. During your wait, you check occasionally with the woman at the front desk to find out when you will be called to see the doctor. She keeps saying, "In a few minutes." You have to be back at work in one hour (at noon). What do you tell the woman at the desk?

One of the responses elicited from a native English speaker is then used as a model for a role play.

Example 22

Excuse me. I have a problem. **I've been waiting** two hours to see the doctor, and I have to be back at work at noon. Can you help me?⁹

In going over the situation with students, focusing on the complaint and its response, it is useful to show the steps and the forms the speaker uses. Note that the first and last moves, which are marked with asterisks, are socially motivated additions to the three-part structure we have been describing:

*Opener (polite, formulaic): Excuse me.

Context/orientation (in present tense): I have a problem.

Complaint (with PPP): I've been waiting for two hours to see the doctor.

Justification (in present tense): I have to be back at work at noon.

*Request for remedy (modal yes-no question): Can you help me?

The moves and forms used to realize the steps should be reviewed by the students who can then ask questions about anything that is not clear. It should be pointed out that this response is relatively polite as far as complaints go. Often complaints are much more direct and the steps that are asterisked above could be absent or take a different form. Time permitting, the teacher might ask the students if the complaint response would take a different form in their language(s).

The class can be given other role play situations for practicing the PPP in complaints. Working in pairs or small groups, they can write a complaint dialogue. Here is a situation about waiting in line:

You wait in line for one hour to buy tickets to see a new movie with some friends. A young man cuts into the line in front of you. What do you say to him?

Once the pairs or small groups have drafted a complaint dialogue, they compare their steps and forms with what one native speaker said in this situation:

Example 23

Hey, **I've been waiting** in line a long time, and I don't appreciate you cutting in here.

Note that the situation has provided the context, so example 23 has only two steps, or moves, the complaint with the PPP and the evaluation. If they wish, the students can make minor modifications to their dialogues before they perform their role plays, which are then discussed by the whole class in terms of appropriateness, steps, and language use.

The third situation that we recommend for teaching the PPP involves explanations or accounts that describe immediate and specific outcomes. Depraetere and Reed (2000) and Bouscaren, Chuquet, and Danon-Boileau (1992) offer the following constructed examples to show how an ongoing activity is described using the PPP and a specific outcome is presented in simple present:

Example 24

I've been making three cakes. (ongoing activity as explanation in PPP)

That's why I'm covered in flour. (outcome in simple present) (Depraetere and Reed 2000, p. 112)

Example 25

I've been running. (ongoing activity as explanation with PPP)

That's why I'm so tired. (outcome in simple present) (Bouscaren, Chuquet, and Danon-Boileau (1992, p. 31)

Note that in both these examples the outcome is in simple present. In our naturalistic data the tense can also be past or future and the ordering of the two steps can vary:

Example 26

That wasn't hard for me at all. (outcome in simple past)

I've been doing that since I was about 3 years old. (ongoing activity as explanation in PPP) (*Newsweek*, 10/21/96, p. 88)

Note that the two uses of 'that' in this example refer to the activity of writing about one's personal experiences.

We found that this function of the PPP, in explanations that describe outcomes, was as likely to occur in written as in spoken sources and there is often an evaluative or follow-up move that also occurs. We recommend the use of a letter to an advice column to illustrate this use in context:

Example 27

Dear Ann:

My husband and I have two sons, aged 11 and 8. (background in simple present)

We are pretty sure this will be our last Santa Claus Christmas (predicted outcome in future tense)

because the boys **have been asking** a lot of questions about the existence of Santa. (ongoing activity as explanation in PPP)

We are thankful they have believed so long, but now we are stumped. (evaluation in present perfect and simple present)

(adapted from a letter to Ann Landers' advice column, *Los Angeles Times*, 11/25/96, section E, p. 6)

Once the students have read and discussed the example, they should work in pairs to write a letter asking for advice regarding an activity—something that they do or that someone else does—which is of concern to them. It is helpful to have some prior discussion to generate possible scenarios, such as the examples in the table below.

It should be pointed out that one can either state the activity first and the outcome second or vice versa, and that the two statements can be in separate sentences or combined with a

Activity/explanation

You've been working outdoors

Your roommate has been smoking

Your mother has been reading your diary

Immediate outcome

You're sunburned

The apartment smells bad

You are angry

subordinator like 'because.' The pairs should decide what activity and outcome they will write about and which grammatical strategy will work best for the letter they write to the advice columnist. The pairs should write their letters on overhead transparencies or on the board so the entire class can see them to discuss the accuracy and effectiveness and to speculate on the response the letter might elicit from an advice columnist.

Conclusion

The PPP verb form nicely illustrates that grammar is a resource speakers and writers use to shape their oral and written communication. For grammar pedagogy in general, research indicates that while some focus on form in ESL/EFL classrooms is helpful (Doughty and Williams 1998), not all types of grammar instruction are equally useful. To be optimally effective, grammar instruction should be based on what actually occurs in authentic discourse. Activities for understanding how grammar works and for practicing grammar should be pragmatic and draw on naturalistic data. Exercises should not be artificially created simply to force learners to practice a given structure; learners benefit greatly from having a context that realistically motivates the use of the target structure.

We hope that our study of the PPP has shown how qualitative analysis of target structures based on a large number of tokens drawn from authentic discourse can provide ESL/EFL teachers and textbook writers with useful information that will help improve grammar instruction. The increasing availability of large language corpora accessible by computer should ease the task of teachers and textbook writers who wish to analyze and use a large number of authentic tokens when developing grammar teaching activities.

Notes

- 1. The first and/or third move are not always overtly expressed; they may only be implied if there is sufficient contextual input or shared background knowledge among interlocutors. Also, the order of moves can occasionally be changed for stylistic effect.
- 2. Conversational design, such as a question and answer pair or some sort of coordinating conjunction or parataxis, are the exceptions to this generalization:

Example 1

A: What have you been doing?

B: I've been jogging.

Example 2

To get some exercise, **I've been hiking** on weekends, and **I've been swimming** too. (constructed examples)

In such cases, our data indicates that it is possible to have two PPP tokens in succession.

- 3. Vendler (1967) refers to punctual actions or events as "achievements", but we find his terminology potentially misleading and thus have modified it to a term more commonly used for describing such verbs.
- 4. Maurer (2000), however, notes that use of the PPP suggests "a shorter or more temporary action" than the use of the present perfect. We are skeptical of this observation, given the many tokens we have found of the PPP occurring with time adverbials that mark a long span of time, suggesting that this is not a useful generalization, for example:

But **it's been going** on since time immemorial. (*The White House Transcripts*, p. 771)

I've watched my father, **he's been flying** for 40 years (UCLA oral corpus, p. 282 line 15206–7)

- 5. Elbaum (2001, p. 63) gives the following bad example to make the point that the PPP cannot be used with "non-action" verbs: She has been absent a lot lately. "To be absent" is not a stative verb but an adjectival predicate and thus cannot possibly take progressive aspect.
- 6. To give credit to Maurer (2000, pp. 37, 39), however, he does add, "When stative verbs occur in the progressive, they generally have different meanings."
- 7. Even though we had no examples in our database, we are still not convinced that it is absolutely impossible to use PPP with 'always' or 'never.' We think examples such as the following are possible in informal conversation:

You know, I've always been wondering about that.

- A: Has Tom been by the office lately?
- B: He's never **been coming** by this office, that's for sure!
- 8. All proper names in our naturalistic oral data have been changed to protect the identity of the speakers.

9. The situation and response originally reported in Hawkins (1985) are reproduced in Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000: pp. 224–225).

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